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AUTHOR Masche, J. Gowert
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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested (Youniss and Smollar, 1985) that the re-negotiation of the parent-adolescent relationship involves processes of separation and connectedness, with separation characterized, among other indicators, as the withdrawing of information by adolescents in order to establish territories that are unsupervised by the parents. This study investigated two cross-sectional samples of 1,494 German adolescents from 10 to 16 years of age for self-disclosure to parents. Results from interviews revealed a decline with age in adolescents' disclosures towards parents. Adolescents disclosed their spare time activities and their personal thoughts more to mothers than to fathers, and disclosed spare time activities more frequently than personal thoughts. The disclosures to mothers were especially frequent concerning spare time activities, and for female adolescents. (EV)

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When Children Tell Less Than Before: The Separation Process of 10 to 16 Year Old Adolescents

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J. Gowert Masche

Friedrich Schiller University of Jena (Germany)

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Summary

In two combined cross-sectional samples of 1,494 adolescents from 10 to 16 years of age, Youniss' and Smollar's assumption of a decline with age in adolescents' disclosures towards parents was confirmed. Adolescents disclosed their spare time activities and their personal thoughts more towards mothers than towards fathers, and disclosed spare time activities more frequently than personal thoughts. The disclosures towards mothers were especially frequent concerning spare time activities, and for female adolescents.

1. Introduction

According to Youniss and Smollar (1985), the re-negotiation of the parent-adolescent relationship involves processes of separation and connectedness. Separation is characterized, among other indicators, as the withdrawing of information in order to establish own territories that are unsupervised by the parents. Youniss and Smollar mention two sorts of information withdrawal: (a) information on spare time activities without parents and (b) on personal thoughts, feelings, and decisions. Thus, according to Youniss and Smollar (1985), a **decline in disclosures on spare time activities and on personal thoughts is to be expected with age**.

According to numerous studies (for an overview see Masche, 1998), the mother-adolescent relationship is closer and marked by more open communication than the father-adolescent relationship. Also Youniss and Smollar (1985) ascribe "simple communication", i.e. communication for its own sake, predominantly to mothers. **Thus, more frequent disclosures towards mothers than towards fathers can be expected**.
In addition, **disclosures about spare time activities will be more frequent than those concerning personal thoughts** because (a) personal thoughts tend to be more revealing than details of spare time activities, (b) as shown in the heightened frequency of disputes (Schmied, 1982), parents try to exert control over their offsprings' spare time activities, and can thus be expected to enquire about them more frequently.

Previous research revealed conflicting findings on gender differences. Females appeared more deeply involved in personal relationships than males, but also matured earlier and showed greater emotional independence. However, in several German studies, the mother-daughter relationship has been proven to be especially close (c.f. Masche, 1998). Thus, **disclosures between mothers and daughters will occur especially often**.

Finally, as the samples investigated comprise both East and West German participants, who may differ in their closeness towards parents (Melzer, 1992), possible East and West differences will be controlled for.

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2. Method

Sample: Two German samples were interviewed: (a) 683 children (10-13 years) in 1993, (b) 811 adolescents (13-16 years) in 1996.
Interview question: "Do you tell your mother (father)…": (a) "…where you spend your spare time after school, after work" (spare time activities), (b) "…what you are predominantly occupied with" (personal thoughts).
Answer categories: *never / she (he) is not interested* (1), *rarely* (2), *occasionaly* (3), *always* (4).
ANOVA: For both samples combined, five-factorial ANOVA with age, gender, and region (East vs. West Germany) as grouping factors and parent (mother vs. father) and topic (spare time activities vs. personal thoughts) as within-subjects factors. Before combining the samples, equality of 13 year olds in both samples must be checked.

3. Results

No differences emerged for the 13 year olds between 1993 and 1996, neither as a main effect of time of data collection ($F = .68$, 1/298 *df*, *ns*), nor as an interaction with the other factors investigated. This allows the two samples to be combined into one cross section from 10 to 16 years of age.

Table 1 shows the results of the five-factorial ANOVA for age, gender, region (East vs. West Germany), parent (mother vs. father), and topic (spare time activities vs. personal thoughts). Only significant effects are printed. These are shown in Figures 1 to 5. Gender ($F = 1.25$, 1/1327 *df*) and region effects ($F = 5.98$, 1/1327 *df*) failed to reach significance.

4. Discussion

Age decline: confirmed. As expected, adolescents disclosed their spare time activities and their personal thoughts less often with age. This fits to Youniss' and Smollar's (1985) description of an important aspect of the parent-adolescent separation process. Polynomical post-hoc analyses revealed only linear and no curvilinear age trends. This suggests that the process of separation begins before and ends after the age range investigated. The form of the lines in Figure 1, however, suggests, that the interval from 10 to 16 may be the age range of the steepest decline in self-disclosure. It may be interesting to explore the relationship between the decline in self-disclosure and the increase of topic avoidance during adolescence, as both concepts have similarities (not talking about certain topics) and differences (topic avoidance includes not talking about topics well-known to both interaction partners).

More disclosures towards mothers: confirmed. This result supports the well-established finding of adolescents having closer relationships to mothers than to fathers. However, although the effect size is impressive, the distinction suggested by Youniss and Smollar (1985) that connectedness (of which "simple conversation" is a part) occurs only with mothers but not with fathers seems too exaggerated a description in the light of the results reported here, as well as in previous studies.

More disclosures concerning spare time activities than personal thoughts: confirmed. This result also shows that it is important to investigate various topics of disclosure that differ in degree of conflict potential and intimacy. The more intimate a topic, the higher the likelihood of keeping it secret.

Additional finding: Difference between parents more pronounced concerning spare time activities. The frequency difference between the two topics is greater for mothers than for fathers (see Fig. 4). At first glance, this is surprising as the father-adolescent relationship is marked by shared spare time activities. However, it is not likely that adolescents would talk to their fathers about activities in which they had shared. In addition, when adolescents communicate more with mothers than fathers, it is plausible that this mainly concerns "easier" topics which are also more diverse than the main topic of personal thoughts. The role of maternal control, however, may be ambiguous. It may lead to more conversations about spare time activities, but also to topic avoidance by the adolescent. This might be a reason why the effect found is not larger.

More disclosures towards mothers by females: confirmed. This result again replicates the intense mother-daughter relationships repeatedly found in Germany.

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Address correspondence to:
J. Gowert Masche
Friedrich Schiller University of Jena
Institute for Psychology
Am Steiger 3 / 1, D-07743 Jena, Germany
e-mail: s7mago@rz.uni-jena.de

Table 1: Significant Influences on Self-Disclosures

Independent Variables	*F*	*df*	η^2
Age	10.67***	6/1327	.05
Parent (Mother vs. Father)	431.30***	1/1327	.25
Topic (Spare Time Activities vs. Personal Thoughts)	89.77***	1/1327	.06
Parent x Topic	17.97***	1/1327	.01
Parent x Gender	30.80***	1/1327	.02

*** $p < .001$

Figure 1:

Linear Age Decline in Disclosures

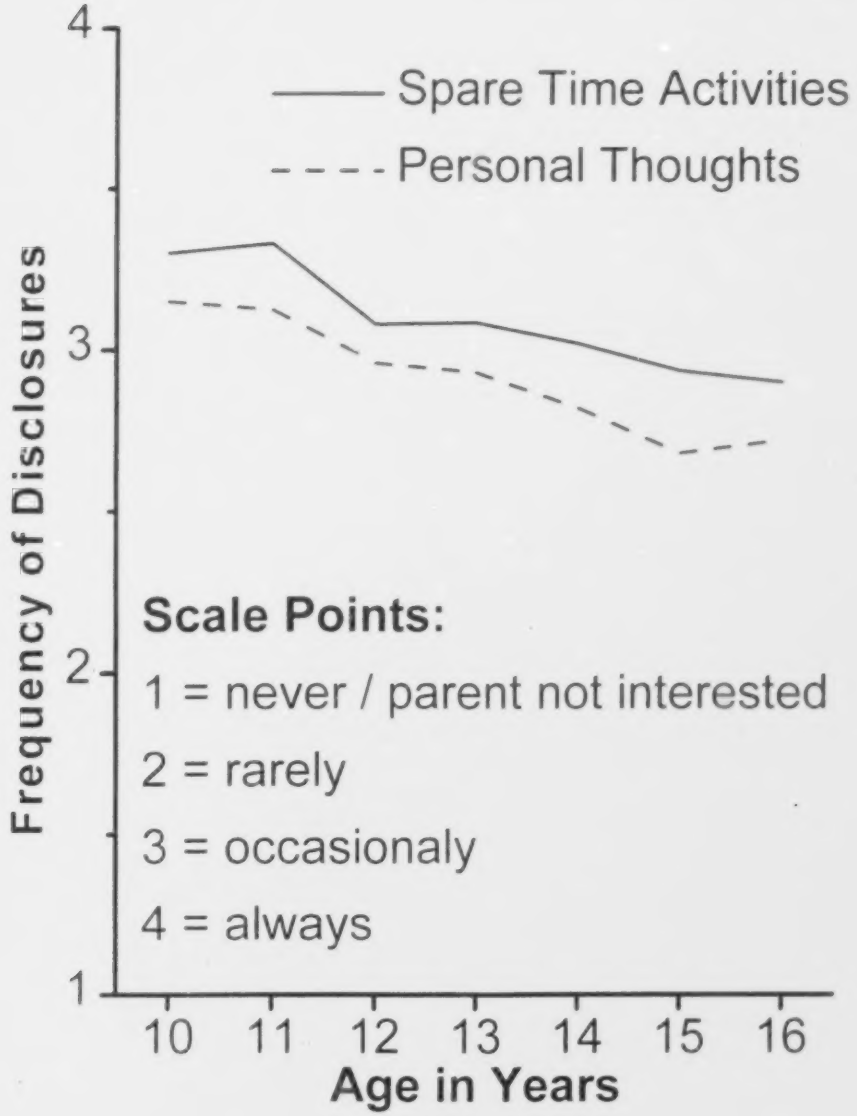

Figure 2: More Disclosures to Mothers than to Fathers

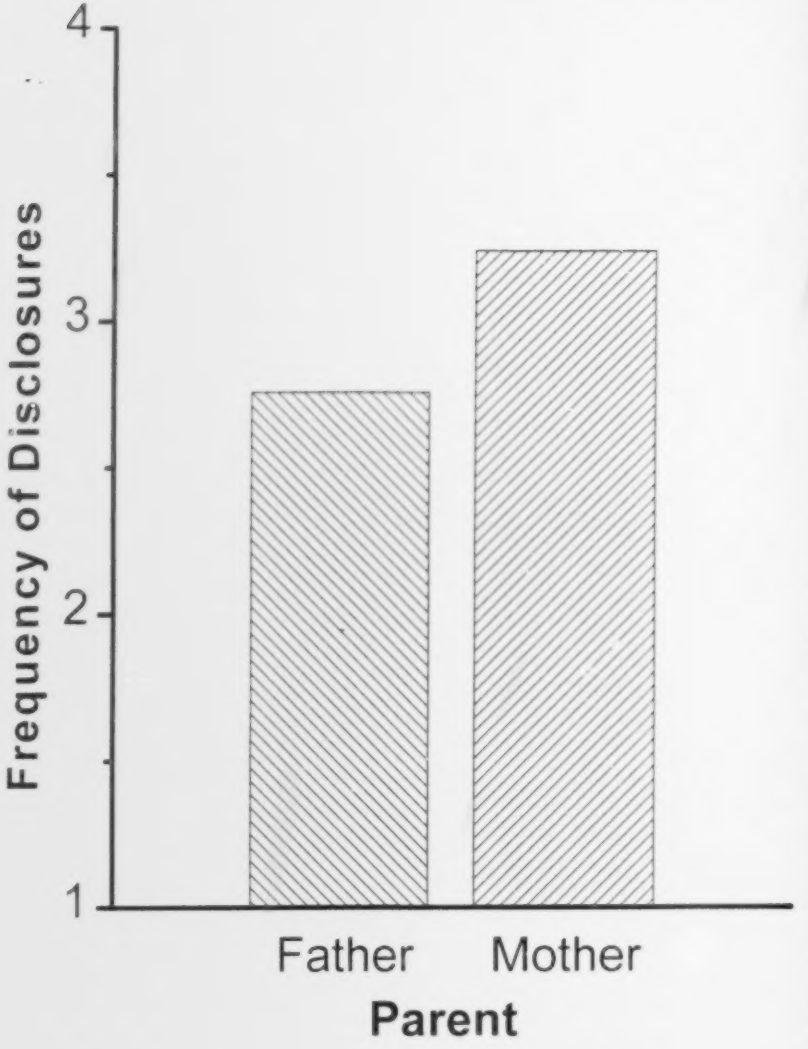

Figure 3: More Disclosures About Spare Time Activities Than About Personal Thoughts

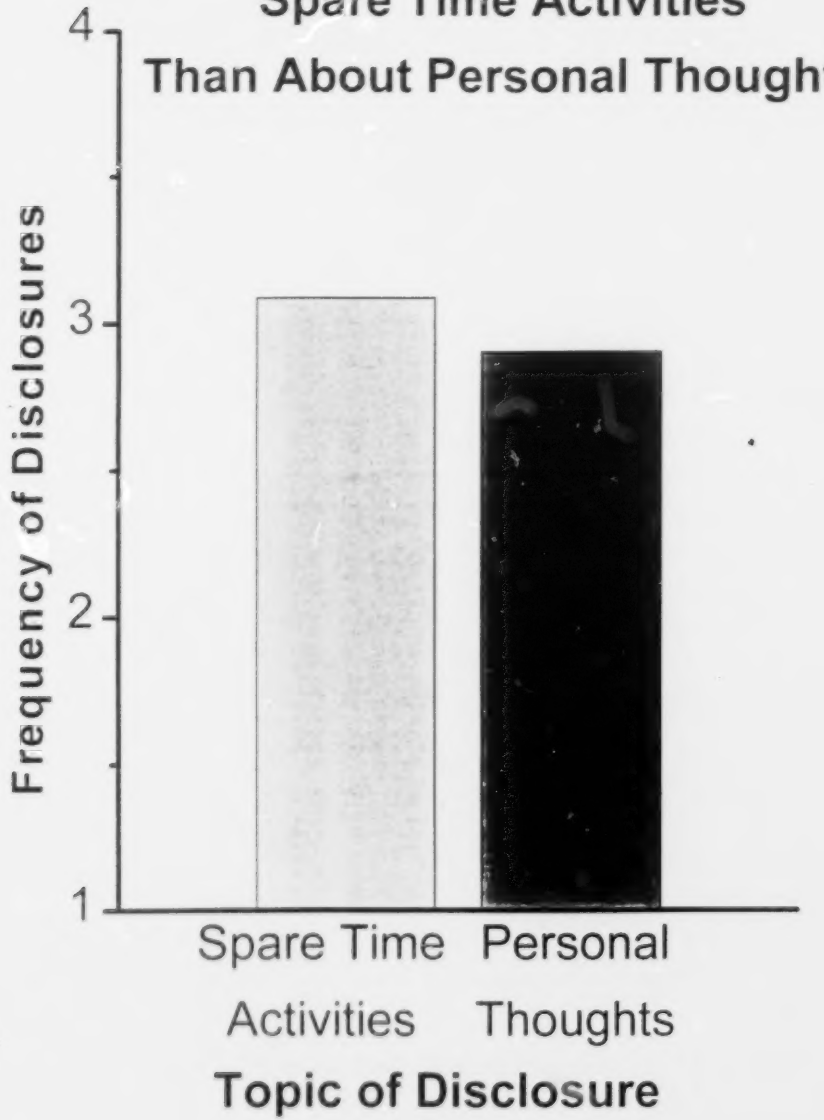

Figure 4: Parent Difference More Pronounced at Spare Time Activities

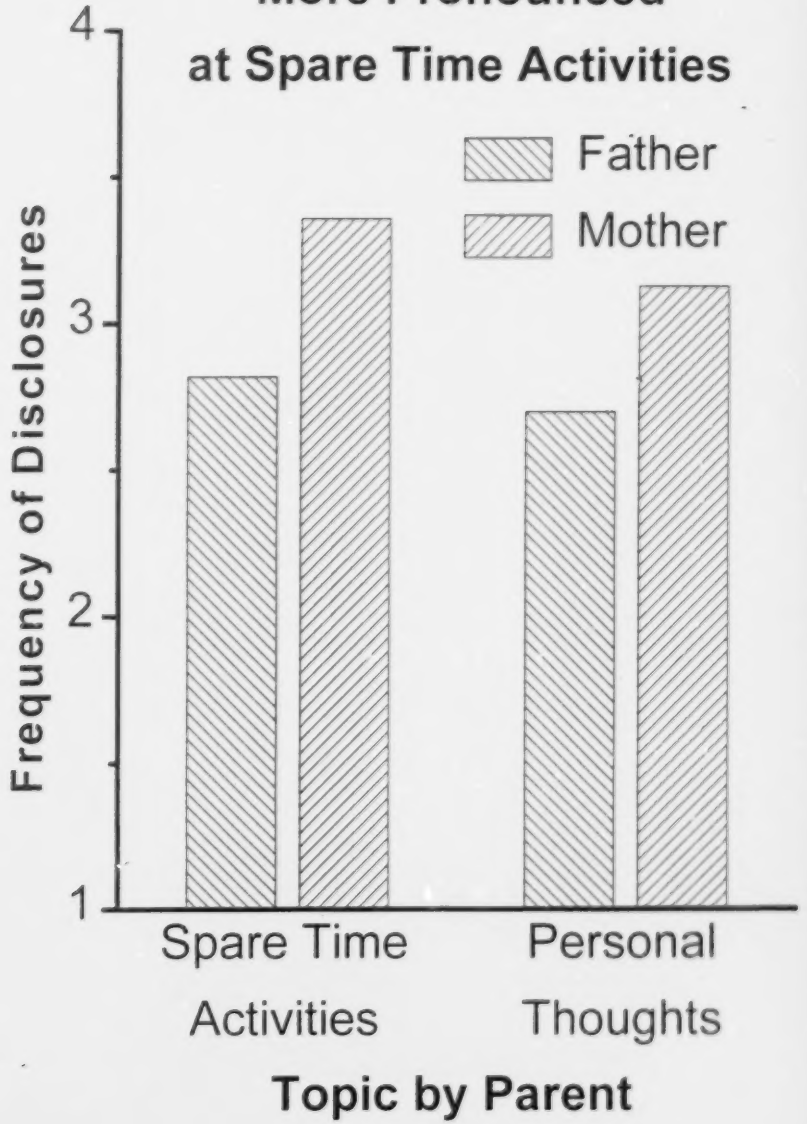

Figure 5: Especially Females Tell more to Mothers than to Fathers